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ABSTRACT

Three exercises have been developed to help participants experience and analyze the effects of seating arrangements on interpersonal communication. The exercises have been used in classes for college students and for federal and municipal employees. This paper discusses the objectives of the exercises and provides detailed instructions for conducting each exercise. In the first exercise, participants assess the seating positions most frequently selected during discussions between two persons and analyze the effects of unnatural seating arrangements on the discussions. The second exercise is designed to show the way in which seating arrangements for small-group discussions reflect the status of the group members and to demonstrate the effects of disrupting an established group's seating norms. The third exercise increases participant awareness of the relationship between seating and self-concept. (GW)

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SEATING CHOICE, STATUS, AND IMPACT ON SELF CONCEPT

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A procession of studies emphasize the importance of seating in interpersonal communication.[1] Richard Brislin cites the central thrust of the findings when he states: "Where people sit is an important index of how they feel about others, as well as how people judge their acceptance or rejection by others."[2] Three new exercises have been developed to explicate this view. The exercises can be used (1) to explore the most frequently chosen seating for dyadic discussion, (2) to examine the effects of disrupting a status seating arrangement, and (3) to focus attention on the impact of individual seating on self concept.

These exercises have been employed in class sessions for college students, federal employees, and municipal employees.[3] During these sessions, students reacted favorably by demonstrating active participation in the exercises, by providing substantive discussion of the questions raised, and by expressing pleasure attributable to the experiences. Many original participants later telephoned, wrote, or stopped by to report new related observations or applications.

Exercise #1: Preferred Seating in Dyadic Discussion

Time: 15-25 minutes.

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Objectives: (1) to assess the most frequently selected seating positions in two person discussions, and (2) to analyze the contrastable influence of unnatural seating on discussion.

Subjects and Materials: ten or more participants, movable chairs without arms, and an area free of tables or other objects.

Instructions: Divide the participants into pairs. Do not state the objective of the exercise until completion. Ask each discussion pair to sit back to back and carry on a discussion about any subject they would like to discuss, or you can suggest a topic. Indicate they will discuss for a few minutes and then will be given other directions. Allow approximately two minutes for the discussion in this seating arrangement. Now, interrupt their conversations by asking each pair to turn their chairs so they can comfortably continue their discussion. Allow approximately two minutes in this new seating. Interrupt the discussion by directing the participants to freeze in position. Next, ask them to move only their heads so they can observe how the other pairs in the room are seated. Ask the participants especially to note the shoulder angles of the respective pairs of discussants and the distance between the discussants. Allow about one minute or less for observation. Un-

freeze the participants and conduct a discussion of what has been observed. You may want to divide the participants into groups of three to eight members for this discussion.

Discussion: The following probative questions have been useful in gaining perspective about effects of unnatural seating (the back to back) and about choices for natural seating (the positions selected after turning around):

1. Once the pairs of discussants turned around from the back to back position and continued discussing, what was the most frequently observed shoulder angle? Consider side by side to represent 180 degrees, shoulders at a right angle to represent 90 degrees, and discussants directly face-to-face to represent zero degrees.
2. Why was the most frequently chosen seating angle selected?
3. Approximately how far apart were people seated?
4. What differences, if any, were noticed in the discussion under the two different seating arrangements?
5. What inferences can be made about seating socially or on the job when reduction of tension between the discussants is desired?

6. Are there times when unnatural seating arrangements may serve a useful purpose? When? What seatings?

Exercise #2: Taking the Leader's Chair: A Challenge to Status

Time: 35-50 minutes.

Objectives: (1) to increase awareness of the importance of seating in small groups as determinant of participant status, and (2) to observe the effects of disrupting an established group's seating norm.

Subjects and Materials: one or more groups of five or more persons with a table for each group, a discussion problem (such as "How can we reduce crime in our society?"), and a secretly assigned role for one of the participants.

Instructions: Tell participants they will conduct a problem-solving discussion in which they will attempt to maximize idea development. Assign groups and leaders. Seat each group so the leader locates at one end of the table (a stereotyped location for the leader).

Secretly arrange for one confederate in each group to carry out an experimental role of taking the leader's seat, following a short break in the discussion. One successful strategy for secret assignment of the role involves issuing cards to all members of each group. As you hand the cards to the individual group members, say, "Here are directions to help

you assist your group toward a productive small group discussion." On all but one card, provide a message such as the following:

> Be an active, enthusiastic participant in your group's discussion. Encourage less talkative members to join in. Prevent anyone from dominating or digressing. If needed, encourage the use of summaries.

On the one card handed to whomever you arbitrarily select as the confederate, print the message:

> As an active participant in the discussion, you also have a secret role. When the instructor announces a break in the discussion, you should return early enough to be seated in the leader's chair before that person comes back to the table. Remain seated there during the discussion or until the leader or others create so much tension that you feel obliged to move to your original or another chair. Do not discuss this role with anyone.

Assign the discussion topic to each group. After five to ten minutes of small group discussion, announce a coffee break (or its equivalent). Encourage everyone to leave his or her seat for a few minutes (be sure all of the leaders do leave their tables during the break).

When the leader and other group members return from the break, the confederate will be in the leader's seat before that person gets to the chair. The confederate, hopefully, will act as naturally as possible when seated. He or she should remain in the leader's chair forcing that person to take another seat or until considerable tension exists

between the leader and the confederate. In the latter instance, the confederate should soon get up and return, if possible, to his or her original seat or another vacant one, thus allowing the leader to re-take that person's original seat.7

The discussions should be allowed to resume for five to ten minutes. Finally, stop the discussions and ask all participants to describe and evaluate the effects of taking the leader's chair and, in some instances, giving it back. This part of the exercise can be continued in the existing small groups or as a large group discussion.

Discussion: The following questions can be used to aid description and evaluation of the status invasions:

1. How did the group leader adjust to his or her seat being taken?
   a. How would group members describe the leader's behavior?
   b. How would the leader describe his or her reactions?
   c. What did the confederate observe?
2. How did the group feel about the confederate taking the leader's chair? Why did group members have these feelings?
3. In those instances in which the leader took a different chair, were any differences noted in the conduct of the

resumed discussion compared with the discussion prior to the break?

4. In those instances in which the confederate got up and returned to previous or alternative seating, were there noticeable effects on the resumed discussion?
   a. Did group members accept the confederate more than during the pre-break discussion?
   b. Did the leader treat the confederate differently?
   c. Were new ideas introduced by the confederate better or less well accepted by the group?
5. Are there times when the dissonance created by taking someone's seat or otherwise breaking from an expected seating arrangement can serve a useful function in facilitating communication?

Exercise #3: Seating and Self Concept

Time: 20-30 minutes.

Objective: to increase participant awareness of the relationship between seating and self concept.

Subjects and Materials: several participants and a list of probative questions.

Instructions: Assign small groups the task of brainstorming on the discussion questions. Following the group discussions, request that a person from each group describe as vividly

as possible his/her group's conclusions so members of other groups can hear the results. Finally, ask all the participants to discuss the possible relationship between the conclusions reached by the groups and the requirements for planning seating at public meetings and other gatherings.

Discussion: Can you describe personal experiences in which seating has been unsatisfactory and why? (1) at a restaurant? (2) at a public meeting? (3) in a class? (4) on a bus, train, or airplane? (5) at a party? In which examples did the experience relate to the status of the seating? Why?

Footnotes

[1]Read the article and note the bibliography by Richard W. Brislin, "Seating as a Measure of Behavior: You Are Where You Sit," in Topics in Culture Learning, ed. Richard W. Brislin, vol. 2 (Honolulu: East-West Culture Learning Institute, 1974), pp. 103-118; and see Mark L. Knapp, Nonverbal Communication in Human Interaction (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1972), pp. 46-62.

[2]Brislin, p. 104.

[3]Participants have included college students enrolled in speech courses in persuasion, federal trainees attending workshops in managing public meetings and managing external affairs, and municipal department managers enrolled in communication workshops.